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The Honourable Denis Paradis

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● (0905)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Hon. Denis Paradis (Brome—Missisquoi, Lib.)): Let us start the session.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3), we are continuing our study of the Action Plan for Official Languages, 2018-2023: Investing in Our Future.

Welcome, everyone. I am extremely pleased to be with you here in Vancouver. Yesterday, we made a stop in Whitehorse. Tomorrow, we continue our journey in Regina. Everything has gone very well. I am sure that you are going to be able to share with us your needs and your wishes. We are a bit like a conveyor belt of needs, between communities like yours and Ottawa.

Thank you for being here. I am extremely pleased that you could join us.

First of all this morning, we welcome Jean-François Packwood, from the Conseil culturel et artistique francophone de la Colombie-Britannique; Yann Lacoste, from the Conseil jeunesse francophone de la Colombie-Britannique; Marie-France Lapierre and Marc-André Ouellette, from the Conseil scolaire francophone de la Colombie-Britannique; Suzana Straus and Marie-Andrée Asselin, from the Fédération des parents francophones de la Colombie-Britannique; and finally, David Pajot, from the Office of Francophone and Francophile Affairs at Simon Fraser University.

We will be hearing from a second group of witnesses after the break.

You have about five minutes each to tell us your views. Afterwards, we will go around the table to hear comments and questions from my colleagues.

Let us start with Mr. Pajot.

Mr. David Pajot (Associate Director, Office of Francophone and Francophile Affairs, Simon Fraser University): Good morning, everyone. Welcome to Vancouver.

I represent the Office of Francophone and Francophile Affairs. This is an office that coordinates, promotes and develops courses in French at Simon Fraser University. I work mainly with two faculties, the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and the Faculty of Education. For example, teacher training is an area that interests us a great deal.

The Office of Francophone and Francophile Affairs is very pleased to see that the action plan has considered the needs of communities. We applaud that step forward.

In helping us to prepare our testimony, one of the questions we were asked was whether certain sectors not in the action plan deserve particular attention.

For post-secondary education in French, the situation is troubling. Funding for the official languages in education program is frozen. Basically, it seems to have been frozen since 2003.

Simon Fraser University is a member of the Association des collèges et universités de la francophonie canadienne (ACUFC). Last April, we met in Moncton. We were able to work with the analysis of the action plan done by Ronald Bisson, who works as a consultant to the ACUFC. According to the table he showed us, funding for the program has been more or less frozen since 2003. He told us that federal investment in the official languages in education program comes to a total of $1.3 billion in Canadian dollars. That is a round figure per five-year cycle.

Since 1970, the official languages in education program has been a flagship program of the federal government in terms of official languages. The government's demographic targets in the 2018-2023 action plan demand significant investments. The cost of living is increasing. We would like to know whether the government is taking this increase into account.

We also applaud the proposal to train future bilingual Canadians, which the action plan also contains. The plan proposes to promote a bilingual Canada, with a specific target of raising the bilingualism rate of English speakers outside Quebec from 6.8% to 9% by 2036.

But we ask this question: at which exact point in a school career do we consider a person to be bilingual? Is it in grade 8, grade 10, grade 12? Could we be more ambitious and also train people in French after their post-secondary studies?

In most Canadian provinces, we are facing a shortage of teachers. The same goes for the vast majority of federal government services provided in British Columbia. Our challenge is in recruiting bilingual staff. All those professionals have to be trained, and the priority would be to train them first at local level, in order to make it easier to retain them.

Training those professionals comes at a cost and requires investments. If the investments are frozen, it means difficulties in maintaining the programs currently in place in our universities in British Columbia, and perhaps elsewhere in Western Canada. There are also difficulties in developing programs, expanding the range of programs, and tailoring them to local situations.

We also have concerns about the two envelopes of $31,290,000. The first is to develop and support recruitment strategies for teachers in minority francophone schools. The second is to recruit immersion and French-as-a–second-language teachers. Do we have to hire teachers or train them? That is another question we have.

The Office of Francophone and Francophile Affairs believes that the action plan needs to be more ambitious, especially in terms of post-secondary education.

Thank you.

● (0910)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Pajot.

We now turn to Ms. Asselin and Ms. Straus. I am not sure which one of you will give the presentation.

Ms. Straus, the floor is yours.

Mrs. Suzana Straus (Acting President, Fédération des parents francophones de Colombie-Britannique): Mr. Chair, distinguished members of Parliament, on behalf of the Fédération des parents francophones de Colombie-Britannique, thank you for coming to meet us to study the issues involved in implementing the Action Plan for Official Languages, 2018-2023: Investing in Our Future. It is a real pleasure for me to be here today in my very new role as acting president.

The federation is a key player in developing French-language education in the province. We contribute to community development in British Columbia in multiple ways.

Implementing the action plan directly affects all our areas of interest. First of all, we consider that, overall, the action plan reflects the cross-Canada consultations on official languages held by Canadian Heritage in 2016. We are particularly pleased with Canadian Heritage's supplementary budget envelope, the goal of which is to increase the core funding for community organizations. Starting this year, this has already meant a 20% increase in program funding for all the community organizations in our province. We look forward to learning how Canadian Heritage will be distributing the rest of the program funding from the second year to the fifth year of the action plan.

We hope that these additional funds will be distributed in a way that will lessen the funding disparities among organizations. We also hope that it will tackle troubling or emerging situations, including the issue of language transfer in our very young. In British Columbia, four out of five francophone children will be assimilated before kindergarten. This is of extreme concern for the parents we represent.

The action plan allocates additional investments in a sector that is particularly dear to our hearts. This is early childhood, where the need is great.

Although we are delighted with the $20 million in additional funding allocated both to professional education and training for early childhood educators and to help entrepreneurs, we still find it curious that the federal government has determined, with no prior notice and no consultation, that 33% of the funding will go to entrepreneurship and 66% to training. In a setting where the goal is to improve services for and by communities, and where needs and circumstances vary greatly from one province or territory to another, why not leave it up to the communities to decide which initiatives the funds should be used for, rather than setting limits or percentages on the strategies to be undertaken? The question has to be asked.

In British Columbia, for example, we clearly have to build community capacity first, after which we will be able to create new day care spaces. That is the conclusion we came to in the study we published last February entitled "Les centres de garde francophones pour la petite enfance en Colombie-Britannique". This does not fit at all well with the funding allocated very specifically to entrepreneurship and training.

We believe that it is essential that the criteria and solutions proposed in the new early childhood funding framework be flexible and tailored to the particular needs of the communities.

The investment of $10 million over five years to the Public Health Agency of Canada to improve its health promotion program for young children is good news, in our view. The recent consultation with francophone communities allowed us to communicate to the agency our concern with certain aims of the program, and especially with the following points.

First of all, the action plan states that "the Agency will work with key stakeholders to ensure projects respond to the needs of the communities". In many minority francophone communities in Canada, services in French are delivered by a single organization, which often makes the development of local partnerships impossible. The agency must therefore avoid imposing criteria and service delivery models that may suit the majority, but that do not correspond in any way to the reality of francophones in minority situations.

Second, we insisted that the agency model itself on the social innovation and social financing initiative undertaken by the Department of Employment and Social Development. We believe that the middle-of-the road approach, focused on services designed by and for francophones, lends itself more to flexible initiatives that meet the needs of francophone minority communities. The approach offers a sense of community synergy that, in the long term, leads to the implementation of permanent strategies.

● (0915)

We are delighted that the federal government plans to spend more than $95 million on community spaces in the next five years and that early childhood services are eligible for this infrastructure funding program.

However, many questions remain unanswered. Will early childhood programming be tied solely to school infrastructure projects? Will funding new projects for community day care services be allowed? Will the funding program be flexible enough to provide parents with services in their vicinity?

We believe that the infrastructure program must be able to be sufficiently flexible to provide parents with a range of services that are tailored to their needs and their geographical reality.

Although the current government seems to be listening to official language communities, the fact remains that the impermanent nature of the federal structure in its support for education in the minority language and for early childhood services in French, and the lack of concrete obligations in those areas, is keeping minority francophone communities in a perpetual state of uncertainty.

The Fédération des parents francophones de Colombie-Britannique therefore asks you to recommend that the government modernize the Official Language Act to guarantee specific and long-lasting protections in these areas.

Mr. Chair, ladies and gentlemen of the committee, thank you for listening to me. I will be happy to answer your questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Straus.

We will now hear from Marie-France Lapierre or Marc-André Ouelette, from the Conseil scolaire francophone de la Colombie-Britannique. I am not sure which one of you is giving the presentation

Ms. Marie-France Lapierre (Chair, Conseil scolaire francophone de la Colombie-Britannique): We both are.

The Chair: Okay. Please go ahead.

Ms. Marie-France Lapierre: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen of the committee.

My sincere thanks for this opportunity to appear before you on behalf of the Conseil scolaire francophone de la Colombie-Britannique, the CSF.

Mr. Marc-André Ouellette (Vice-Chair, Conseil scolaire francophone de la Colombie-Britannique): The Action Plan for Official Languages, 2018-2023: Investing in Our Future, announces major investments in education and early childhood services in the minority language. The CSF is grateful for the federal government's efforts in this regard. We are delighted to note that the government has heard the concerns that your committee raised about the importance of early childhood and the need to support it.

Thanks to your work in 2012 and 2016, as well as the work done by the Standing Senate Committee on Official Languages in 2005 and 2017, some structural problems that need permanent solutions have been identified. We are grateful for the work that has been done in that area.

We continue to take the position that the problems we are experiencing cannot be solved by an nth action plan or another protocol. Although the government has promised to make changes, we point out today that the action plan has a fundamental shortcoming: it proposes no permanent solution with regard to education and early childhood.

We have said it before and we say it again today: the difficulties that the Conseil scolaire francophone de la Colombie-Britannique faces are structural. We need permanent solutions.

The investments announced are a step in the right direction and are necessary without question. However, upholding the rights of British Columbia's French-language community is not solely a matter of distributing money, especially if the financial support is not effectively targeted. Genuine respect for the rights of the francophone community will involve the modernization of the Official Languages Act. That is why we would like to take advantage of your study on the action plan to ask you to recommend some amendments to the Official Languages Act.

● (0920)

Ms. Marie-France Lapierre: In summary, here are the three main shortcomings of the action plan, together with the amendments that we are respectfully submitting to you. You will find the details of our proposals in the brief.

First, the action plan provides no concrete solution to the problem of access to real property. It simply repeats that the issue is complex; in our opinion, that is not so. We are asking that the act be modified to require that federal institutions consult minority language school boards before disposing of real property assets.

Second, the action plan recommends using federal fund transfer mechanisms, and these pose problems. In order to solve the problem of a lack of accountability, transparency and consultation mechanisms, we propose that the act be modified to establish federal government financial support for education and early childhood programs.

Third, the action plan does not indicate that the federal government will require Statistics Canada to enumerate all rights holders under section 23 of the Charter. We propose that the act be modified to require Statistics Canada to do so, as you have previously requested.

In a word, we are grateful for the investments that have been announced, but we are convinced that the problems we experience will continue if real changes to the act are not made.

We thank you very sincerely for your attention. We welcome any questions you may have.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

The floor now goes to Yann Lacoste, from the Conseil jeunesse francophone de la Colombie-Britannique.

Mr. Yann Lacoste (President, Conseil jeunesse francophone de la Colombie-Britannique): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair

With your permission, I will use my telephone. My printer decided to take a break this morning, so I have no paper version.

I am extremely grateful to the committee for coming to listen to us. It is always a pleasure for us to have these discussions with you. The discussions are important for our organizations and our community, and that is all very positive.

I am the president of the Conseil jeunesse francophone de la Colombie Britannique, an organization run by and for the young with the objective of providing opportunities to the province's young francophones, wherever they are and at whatever level.

In terms of the action plan, the investments in and strengthening of minority communities are extremely positive for us. An effective and fully supported linguistic duality engages and strengthens communities. I personally have acquired an interest in community involvement by discovering an aspect of the francophone community. I know that I am not the only one to have had the experience.

Providing funds directly to the communities will have a major effect and can only lead to positive things. As you know, freezing funds for core programming in recent decades has forced a number of organizations to become dissipated. It goes without saying that this enhancement will re-energize them in a major way. Overall, the message is very positive for us. It is a sign that you have listened to us and heard us, and we are very grateful to you.

However, in our opinion, some avenues of research, some points, deserve further attention.

One of those points has to do with the funding of recurring projects, as opposed to core program funding. At the moment, some organizations, such as the one I represent, have annual recurring projects that have existed since the beginning. For example, we are on our 27th Jeux francophones de la Colombie-Britannique and our 21st edition of the Parlement jeunesse francophone de la Colombie-Britannique. These projects are not part of our programming, but, for other organizations, projects of this kind are funded from their core funding envelope.

We spend considerable time and effort to meet these demands over and over again, with the result that we have less time to prepare or implement new projects. It also means that the 20% increase in our programming is lower, when compared with other organizations that include these projects in their programming.

We feel that there is room for some evaluation of the reality of recurring projects, as opposed to core programming. The effects could be to unlock funds for new projects and to engage the community even more.

Now for our second major point.

Youth organizations like ours have two mandates, one in the community and the other in education. There are positive measures for the community mandate, but, as we understand it, there will be no increase in grants for the official languages in education program, or OLEP. That is regrettable because it penalizes us, and a lot of other organizations.

At the moment, we are a major partner in education, but, like the majority of youth organizations across the country, we see very little benefit from direct contributions to education. We fully understand that those funds go first to other organizations like school boards.

We see indirect benefits thanks to our fine partnerships, but having a double mandate with a single funding stream makes our development less certain and specifically slows any initiatives in the field of education.

If there is no increase in OLEP funding in the next five years, we will be spending five more years without access to funding because we are told that the envelope is empty or that it has been fully used. This is a problem that I often discuss with my counterparts in other provinces. It is of major importance for the advancement of the youth of the country.

In this regard, we want to know when the agreement between the federal government and the provinces will be signed. We would like to have more information on that.

The last point deals with a problem that was raised even before the action plan was developed. It was also mentioned earlier. It seems that the provinces do not always justify their use of education funding to the federal government. We simply raise the question of the provinces' accountability for education funding.

This action plan invigorates us and is very positive for us, but we feel that it could go a little further. We look forward to continuing to work with you.

Thank you.

● (0925)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Lacoste.

The floor now goes to Jean-François Packwood, from the Conseil culturel et artistique francophone de la Colombie-Britannique.

Mr. Jean-François Packwood (Executive Director, Conseil culturel et artistique francophone de la Colombie-Britannique): Good morning, Mr. Chair and members of the committee. Thank you for inviting us and for listening to our presentations.

As mentioned, I work at the Conseil culturel et artistique francophone de la Colombie-Britannique. Our organization is the provincial voice for arts and culture. We promote the development of francophone arts and culture here in the province. Arts and culture span the country and are an engine of vitality. We saw an example of this at the beginning of the session. The CD you were presented with is a fine example of the scope of our arts and culture.

At the outset, I must say that our organization, as well as the sector in its entirety, is particularly pleased to see arts and culture clearly established in the Action Plan for Official Languages, 2018-2023: Investing in Our Future. To be completely honest, I will say that we have been waiting for this for a number of years. Our organization also pointed this out in a media release we issued when the action plan was announced last March.

Arts and culture are dealt with in the section entitled "Investing in Culture", which is part of Pillar I, entitled "Strengthening Our Communities". For us, this shows a recognition of the sector and of the work being done across the network, for example with the Fédération culturelle canadienne-française, which is our national voice. Overall, we are happy with the enhancements in the action plan.

We are also happy with the consultation process with the provinces and territories in determining the priorities for additional funding in the action plan. We consider that this provides the government and the communities with a real opening to work together and to commit to establishing priorities.

However, we still have questions as to the implementation of the action plan and the awareness of it on the part of other departments. For example, we wonder whether incentives have been, or will be, established to encourage not only the implementation of the action plan but also other departments to adopt its recommendations.

The action plan expresses a desire to encourage an intersectoral approach as a way of implementing the initiatives it describes. We wonder, for example, how organizations responsible for official language, and more specifically Canadian Heritage, will be able to encourage other departments to collaborate in implementing its various measures.

As we have already indicated, we acknowledge the investment announced in the action plan and the increase in program funding. For us, and, I believe, for the entire arts and culture sector, and for the community, this is a major step forward.

However, we believe that it is important to mention that this investment is playing catch-up. No additional investments have been made for many years, in fact. That leads us to say that indexing should be considered as a priority. If that principle is not observed in the coming years, we are afraid that we will still be underfunded. For our sector, and for the community as a whole, indexing the funds is a priority in the coming years.

In closing, I would say that we are aware of the fact that the action plan is mostly about official languages and Canadian Heritage programs. We are pleased with the investments, such as the community cultural action fund. That said, we must point out the importance of other programs that are not in the ambit of the department responsible for official languages, such as the Canada arts presentation fund. This program is a pillar for communities and for our members involved in the performing arts. That means festivals and community and cultural centres. The finds allocated to this program have not increased for practically as long as those allocated to the community life component of the official languages program. This program, with the official languages, really enhances the vitality of our communities. We believe that it is important to give it particular attention in the years to come, certainly, but sooner rather than later, because there is a great need for arts and culture to flow freely throughout our country.

● (0930)

Thank you for listening.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Packwood.

Now we continue by going around the table.

Mr. Clarke, the floor is yours.

Mr. Alupa Clarke (Beauport—Limoilou, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good morning, everyone. We are delighted to be here in Vancouver, and to be meeting with the OLMCs in the area.

Beyond the specific nature of each of the groups and understanding your concerns, our objective is to find out your three absolute priorities in terms of modernizing the Official Languages Act. In addition, you have already spoken about the action plan, but I would like to hear you talk about it some more.

Let's start with Mr. Pajot.

Mr. David Pajot: I will yield the floor to the representatives of the Conseil scolaire francophone de la Colombie-Britannique.

I do not want to talk on behalf of the Office of Francophone and Francophile Affairs. Well, maybe just a little. The vast majority of our students, 90% in fact, come from an immersion program. Speakers of French in British Columbia are very diversified. For our students, French is often their third language.

It is increasingly difficult to tell the difference between a francophone and a francophile. So I feel that the Official Languages Act has to move in that direction. We have to reassess what the concepts of francophone and francophile mean. Am I francophone myself? It is a question I ask myself too. I speak three languages every day. I grew up speaking Breton. When I talk to students at the university, they think I am francophone, because I am from France. But identity ebbs and flows.

Mr. Alupa Clarke: The clock is ticking. You have stated your first priority. What would the second one be?

Mr. David Pajot: Personally, I only see the one.

Mr. Alupa Clarke: Thank you very much.

Let us continue with you, Ms. Asselin.

Mrs. Marie-Andrée Asselin (Executive Director, Fédération des parents francophones de Colombie-Britannique): We can certainly state three priorities.

Our first priority would be that each agreement between the feds and the provinces should contain a clause about the francophone communities that really meets their needs.

Second, before those clauses are written, the francophone communities should first be consulted. For example, the multilateral framework on early learning and child care contains a language clause for francophone communities and that is great. However, what the clause specifies does not match the needs of the communities in the province. If we had been consulted in advance, we would have been able to suggest some good ideas that would have given the clause some teeth.

Our third priority, in terms of modernizing the Official Languages Act, deals with statistics. We would like to have clear statistics so that we can determine the number of francophones and rights holders. That would help us to obtain more services, to build schools of a decent size and to provide families with early childhood services.

● (0935)

Mr. Alupa Clarke: Very good. Thank you.

Mr. Ouellette, Ms. Lapierre, what are your priorities?

Ms. Marie-France Lapierre: For us, it would be the disposal of federal lands.

Mr. Alupa Clarke: That is a big problem in Vancouver, isn't it?

Ms. Marie-France Lapierre: It is a very big problem, not just in Vancouver, but throughout the province.

We have difficulty finding space and facilities in a lot of locations. We do not really have an involvement or a presence at municipal level. We need to find places to build schools. You need to know that we have seen an increase in our school population, which has gone from 1,600 people when we started to about 6,000 people now.

Mr. Alupa Clarke: When the federal government wants to dispose of a piece of land that it owns, steps must be followed. First, provinces have to be asked if they want it. If a province says that it does not, they then have to ask the City of Vancouver if they want it. There is a pecking order than must be followed.

Are you suggesting that francophone communities should have priority for those lands? Do you believe that the francophone communities should be consulted first?

Ms. Marie-France Lapierre: Yes, exactly. Francophone school boards should be consulted. When the Official Languages Act of 1988 was passed, there were practically no francophone school boards compared to now. Our school board was founded in 1995; we did not even exist in 1988. We are not consulted. I can think of at least four pieces of federal land for which we were not considered. We would have saved millions of dollars if they had been offered to us.

Mr. Alupa Clarke: So, in your view, this is a basic priority in terms of modernizing the act.

Ms. Marie-France Lapierre: Yes.

Mr. Alupa Clarke: Do you have any other priorities, before we move on?

Ms. Marie-France Lapierre: Yes, we do.

There is the matter of the census. It is important for all our young people to be enumerated in the census. This is related to the issue of early childhood. Actually, there is now talk about subsidies for teachers in proportion to the number of francophone families. The reality is that most of our families are not francophone, they are exogamous. If you just count families in which both families are francophone, the number is much lower. So it is important to include all our rights holders in the census in order to help the fields of early childhood and education. It would allow finances to be better organized, whether for not-for-profit organizations or for us.

I also sit on the board of directors of the CCAFCB and we have to account for the money we receive to the penny. I find it inconceivable that the province is not required to do the same thing.

With the OLEP, we are required to specify what amount comes from the province, while the province provides us only with the base amount, with nothing additional, including for early childhood. We are told that the Ministry of Education provided an equivalent amount, but that is not the case. There must be additional investments. There has to be a framework, an accountability mechanism so that we can see how the funds are distributed. My colleagues raised this issue too. We have to know how the funds are going to be allocated.

Clearly, I support culture in the schools, but it is important for the school boards to be involved. It cannot just be the community organizations that come into the schools at SOGI time or something of the kind. It has to be part of the school board's vision.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Lapierre.

I am trying to manage the time in order to give each member six minutes for questions and answers together.

So now we move immediately to Darrell Samson.

Mr. Darrell Samson (Sackville—Preston—Chezzetcook, Lib.): Thank you.

I am sure that others will have the opportunity to speak during the session.

I would first like to talk to the representatives of the Fédération des parents francophones de Colombie-Britannique.

You raise an important point and I would like you to tell us more about it. Can you confirm to us whether Canadian Heritage has stopped its support for research and data collection, or is it continuing? All the witnesses today, representing francophone minority organizations, need precise data in order to lay out their arguments and enhance their rights. Can you give us some details on that?

● (0940)

Mrs. Marie-Andrée Asselin: Thank you for the opportunity to do so.

You are right, Canadian Heritage has no longer been funding statistical research on francophone communities for a number of years. The 2011 census was the last study for which it was done.

In the past, Canadian Heritage provided some funding to the Commission nationale des parents francophones. Using information provided by Statistics Canada and broken down by region and by sector, this was in order to study all the data on early childhood and rights holders. It helped us a lot, because it gave us numbers, albeit incomplete ones. Of course, we want all our rights holders to be enumerated. At least it previously gave us a good statistical picture of our communities. It provided us with arguments to present to the province when we were asking for a school in such and such a place, or a pre-school, or some activities and some health care services, for example.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you. Yes, there seems to have been a change in priorities. We will have to look at that again, because that data is essential. Everyone around the table agrees on that.

Let me now turn to the representatives of the Conseil scolaire francophone de la Colombie-Britannique.

Of course, I'm very pleased to see you again. As you well know, I spent 11 years as a school board executive in Nova Scotia and I was able to experience some of the challenges with you from afar.

I want to start by congratulating you, because I think you are the most successful in Canada in moving this issue forward, ensuring that our rights are upheld and that we receive what we are entitled to, to a certain extent.

Some have pointed to the need for a language clause. I know we talked a little bit about early childhood. That being said, I think this language clause will be essential to the success of our discussions with each department to get what is rightfully ours.

Your other point about real estate is really unique. For 10 or 15 years, you've been looking for land in Vancouver for French-language schools, but there seems to be none. However, there is land for all kinds of other uses. In our report, we will have to insist on that point.

As Mr. Clarke mentioned earlier, when the federal government is about to sell some of its land, consultations should automatically be held on the distribution of the land and the francophone minority should be taken into account in the negotiations to ensure that it gets its fair share. It is inconceivable that you would not be consulted when those lands are being sold. After all, if the province or municipality does not give its fair share to the francophone minority, it is up to the federal government to do so, since its role is to ensure the development and vitality of the communities and school boards.

Thank you very much for your significant efforts, which will allow the committee to write its report.

You also raised the issue of the data from Statistics Canada and the enumeration of rights holders under paragraph 23(1)(b) and subsection 23(2) of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Can you elaborate on that?

Mr. Marc-André Ouellette: Thank you very much, Mr. Samson.

You know that the disposal of federal government lands is very important to us. As you said, in Vancouver, we've been looking for land for 15 years, without success. However, it was not for lack of trying. We have been asking the federal government for land since the 2000s. Everyone knows exactly what we need.

For example, when the federal government disposed of the Jericho lands, it ignored the request made by the francophone community through our school board. The same is true for the Heather Street lands. Negotiations are under way, but it has not been easy to get the government's attention.

This is ongoing, as Ms. Lapierre said earlier. I am thinking here of Royal Roads University in Victoria, where we are talking about 500 acres of land. It's not a small lot; it's huge. In 2016, the Department of National Defence announced that it was beginning the disposal process. Our hands went up right away, but we were not able to meet with departmental officials until August 28, 2018, almost two years later. Even then, it was not a formal consultation, but rather an opportunity to make contact and express our interest.

To answer Mr. Clarke's question, here is the process. The federal government will offer its real property first to other federal departments, then to First Nations, before turning to provincial governments followed by municipal governments. School boards and the francophone community are therefore completely ignored.

There is actually a Treasury Board directive that asks federal departments to consider the needs of the francophone community. It's a fine intent, but it never happens. Mandatory measures are needed. This directive must be included in the Official Languages Act so that it becomes mandatory. That's very important to us.

● (0945)

Ms. Marie-France Lapierre: Despite the fact that everyone and every department received a reminder, we learned about the Royal Roads University land disposal project when Mr. Ouellette read it in the newspaper, not because people came to us to say that the school board had been forgotten.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now go to Mr. Choquette.

Mr. François Choquette (Drummond, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you all very much for being here today. We are pleased to be back in Vancouver to meet with you again, this time on the Action Plan for Official Languages 2018-2023: Investing in Our Future.

We finally made it to Whitehorse, Yukon. We are very happy because we learned a lot there. In terms of the review of the Official Languages Act, the witnesses also talked about the importance of having language provisions. This issue seems to be recurrent, very important and very urgent.

The other theme that the witnesses in the Yukon discussed was that good old action plan. We seem very happy to be able to say that there is finally an action plan and that we had a close call. Instead, Yukoners are wondering why this five-year action plan is not incorporated into the act. They say that, instead of rejoicing, we should be concerned about the fact that we have to pander to partisanship and political debate with each renewal, when the process should be ongoing.

How do you respond to this concern expressed by Yukon's francophone communities? Do you also think it is important to include the obligation to implement a five-year plan in the Official Languages Act?

Mrs. Marie-Andrée Asselin: Yes, it is very important.

That permanent entrenchment in the act will prevent us from always starting over and having to fight for an action plan.

We want the new wording to be very specific, and to mention the major issues facing francophone communities, such as the arts, education and early childhood. This would help us avoid what happened in the previous action plan for official languages, from which the early childhood issue had been completely removed.

We really want a permanent framework that will ensure that an action plan exists and that it is improved. The needs of francophone communities will actually continue to grow from one plan to the next.

Some very important issues such as early childhood will have to be included in the act if they are to be effectively addressed. It should not be possible for a government to simply eliminate the issues that are important for francophone communities.

● (0950)

Mr. Jean-François Packwood: I will answer this question with a quick and simple analogy. The Department of Canadian Heritage is asking francophone communities—and I believe anglophone communities too—from across the country to prepare an action plan, a comprehensive development plan, in accordance with the Canada-community agreements. In my opinion, it would be useful if the action plan included the same request, that developing an action plan be mandatory for the advancement of communities. Thank you.

Ms. Marie-France Lapierre: We fully agree that it should be included.

At the Conseil scolaire francophone de la Colombie-Britannique, we are fortunate to be eligible for funding from the provincial government. However, many organizations have to survive on credit while waiting to receive their grants. This should therefore be taken into account. We give many examples in our brief. I will not go into details, but I invite you to consult paragraphs 38 and 46.

Negotiations would have to start more than a year in advance so that everything could be completed and ready in time for the next go-round. Our Official Languages in Education Program, or OLEP, ended last year, but we will have to hire teachers and people to implement our project. The government has told us to continue with the resources we have now, but we will not be able to prepare the next OLEP until we know how much money will be allocated to us and how much money will be needed.

I suspect all the organizations here have the same problem. It is difficult to make plans without knowing. It is not like a collective agreement, where we can move forward knowing that we will need employees. In this case, we are talking about the lives of people at all levels, in all organizations, including the Conseil scolaire francophone de la Colombie-Britannique. We can't plan because we don't have the information in advance. So if we truly believe in the survival of both official languages, we must enshrine this obligation in the act and we must do it in advance so that people can plan.

Mr. François Choquette: Clearly, the funding must be predictable and stable.

On September 14, 2018, just a few weeks ago, an article entitled "*Les organismes francophones attendent encore le financement promis*" was published in *#ONfr*, mentioning that: "core funding for community organizations has been delayed... But six months later, the 20% increase promised in May for this year has still not materialized in their bank accounts."

From that statement, I understand that you have been waiting for the money since May. It is probably difficult for you to hire people or undertake new projects. If funding does not arrive immediately, unfortunately, your activities this year will probably be in jeopardy.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Choquette.

Mr. Arseneault, you have the floor.

Mr. René Arseneault (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you all for coming and sharing your knowledge and experience in the field. It will certainly help us a lot.

I'm not going to go back to Mr. Clarke's question. It was an excellent question that will help us prepare our recommendations for amendments to the Official Languages Act. I will read the brief carefully on my flight this evening or tomorrow.

I have a question for the representatives of the other organizations. If you have received legal opinions after consulting with lawyers on how the Official Languages Act could be amended to emancipate or promote the culture of official language minority communities, feel free to send them to the clerk of our committee, who will ensure that they are forwarded to us. It doesn't have to be today, it may be in a few months. This is important. The Official Languages Act will be amended in the near future or as soon as possible. Send us anything you think might be useful to us.

Ms. Lapierre or Mr. Ouellette, the last time we met on this committee, I understood from your comments that British Columbia was the only province with no service in any department to provide a little help to francophone minorities. I don't know whether I understood you correctly.

Ms. Marie-France Lapierre: We actually haven't reached an agreement, but there is the OLEP. We still have a minister responsible for francophone affairs. I wrote him a letter asking him whether he could help us with the OLEP. I was told that I should contact the Ministry of Education.

● (0955)

Mr. René Arseneault: Here's the crux of the problem. There's the geographic situation. In Vancouver, the land is expensive. You want us to change the order of priority in the donation or sale of land by the federal government. Right now, the lands go first to federal departments, indigenous people and then to the provinces. The Ministry of Education falls under provincial jurisdiction. We are not talking about a school board per se. That's why I'm asking you about your relationship with the province. We know that school boards fall under provincial jurisdiction.

Mr. Marc-André Ouellette: I would like to clarify one point. There is a francophone affairs office at the Intergovernmental Affairs Secretariat. The people who work there seem to be mainly involved in providing translations and some services in French. It's still quite limited. That being said, I admire those people very much. I was a public servant for 30 years in the government and I know that, as a francophone, the battle is difficult. They do a good job, but the range is still limited.

At the Ministry of Education, there is a French education branch, which includes everyone who speaks French, that is, core French, here at home, at the Conseil scolaire francophone, and in the various immersion programs that may be offered, but that is all.

To set the record straight, I would like to repeat what we said last time. British Columbia is the only province where there is no service agreement such as the one recently reached in Alberta. I think it was reached about two years ago. Under this agreement, someone in each department can be identified to provide the department's services in the official language of choice. We do not have such an agreement, absolutely not.

Mr. René Arseneault: Mrs. Asselin, pardon my ignorance. Earlier, you said that the distribution of funds is predetermined by the federal government, that is, 33% of the funds are allocated to entrepreneurship and 66% to communities. I didn't quite understand. Could you quickly elaborate and explain what you meant?

Mrs. Marie-Andrée Asselin: In the action plan, there are funds earmarked for early childhood education. This includes an additional $20 million to support professional development opportunities and training for early childhood educators, as well as to help entrepreneurs open more child care centres and provide more child care services.

For us, entrepreneurs are not the ones who start child care services. It's the parents' associations, non-profit organizations.

Mr. René Arseneault: I understand.

Mrs. Marie-Andrée Asselin: That funding split won't help us because entrepreneurs don't start day cares.

More spaces for skills training and money for child care worker training are positive measures, but better training doesn't fix worker retention and recruitment problems, not to mention all the other labour challenges. Even at that, the approach is still far too limited in scope.

In addition, we find it odd that we weren't consulted. Why should 33% of the funding go to support entrepreneurs and 66% be allocated to training?

That isn't what we need. What we really need is a small team to help build community capacity in order to increase the number of community-based day cares and support their start-up, in co-operation with parents. What we'd like to know is how this $20 million is going to help us.

The other thing that ties into all this, and Mr. Choquette brought it up, is that things are still stalled. We just found out about the percentages, and we still haven't received the additional funding allocated to early childhood education programs and implementation. The information is trickling in, but we'd like things to move more quickly because the need is great and the early childhood years don't last forever. We really have to do something now.

Mr. René Arseneault: I see. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next, we have Mr. Rioux.

● (1000)

Mr. Jean Rioux (Saint-Jean, Lib.): Madam, did I hear you correctly when you said that four out of five children were assimilated and didn't attend French-language school? Is that indeed the information you gave us?

In other words, we are going to great lengths to support immigration, but we are a long way from being able to say for certain that those people will live their lives in French.

My first question is this. Why?

My second question is about early childhood services. Is that the answer?

Mrs. Marie-Andrée Asselin: Yes. As far as early childhood is concerned, four out of five children are assimilated.

The answer lies in a number of things. For instance, one solution would be setting up day cares for children in the zero to five age group wherever there is a French-language school in the province. We believe that's very important, and it's what we, at the Fédération des parents francophones, have really been working on in recent years, in conjunction with our network.

The challenge we keep coming up against is the lack of early childhood educators, infrastructure and start-up capacity in the community. Right now, we are working with the school board to set up a day care in Nanaimo. We applied for funding to install mobile structures on the school grounds. It's very resource-intensive to install the structures, purchase the equipment and start up the service.

We don't have the capacity to carry out five of these projects a year, but five or six a year are what's needed. We want to build a small team dedicated to working on these types of projects because we really need day cares. We have 20 or so in the province, but we have about 40 communities with French-language schools, so this is extremely important.

Eighty-seven per cent of the families whose children we serve are exogamous, so parents with small children have a really hard time incorporating francophone culture into a child's environment in early childhood. Day cares, and all early childhood services really, play a huge role in serving these children well before they turn five and go to school.

Investing in services for children zero to five years of age is vital, and that includes day cares. It will also put information in the hands of parents so that, right from birth, they can use it to guide their lifestyle choices and decision-making. I'm talking about things like choosing a French-language day care and school, deciding to speak to their children in French, taking part in artistic and cultural activities and attending events put on by local francophone groups.

At the end of the day, that's the way to stop assimilation.

Mr. Jean Rioux: Thank you.

Ms. Marie-France Lapierre: I'd like to point out that that is why our school board representatives are trying to find spots in their schools. The goal is to find a solution to the day care problem. Our problem goes hand in hand with our success. Our schools are getting bigger. In Pionniers, we opened a school in March. When we submitted the request, we were told that the school would be too big for 560 students, and now we have over 700. That creates problems on the day care end.

Something else we've done is put in place pilot projects for four-year-olds, the idea being that they start school sooner to help build a sense of francophone identity.

Mr. Jean Rioux: This is a question I've already started asking.

Do the French-language services available in federal institutions adhere to the spirit of the Official Languages Act?

Mr. David Pajot: Significant challenges exist around staff training. Recruiting workers locally is no easy feat. There are major deficiencies on that front. I'm always talking to people at the RCMP, the Canada Revenue Agency, the Canada Border Services Agency and the like. We have programs aimed at training future public servants. At the university here, we have a basic French program, but only 20 or so students a year take it, so it's not enough to meet the needs of a professional population locally.

Retention is the challenge these government organizations come up against. You have bilingual government workers who come from out east—Ontario, Quebec or New Brunswick—but they don't stay in British Columbia for more than three or four years. They don't settle here long term for reasons as basic as money. What's the point of staying here three or four years if you can't buy an apartment and put down roots? It's especially important, then, to have the capacity to train workers locally to work out west, whether it be in British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba or Saskatchewan.

The situation also has to do with the teacher shortage. They're intertwined. I nevertheless think it's important to train people here, in B.C., so people with the ability to work in both official languages stay here. That also ties in with the principle of providing education beginning in childhood. When immigrants come to B.C., they might easily wonder what the benefit of enrolling their children in a French-language school would be. They have those kinds of questions, what we call family politics.

Why would they bother registering their children in a French-language school when assimilation at all levels occurs regardless? It isn't limited to childhood. It also happens in adulthood. When people call a service provider in French in order to be served in French and yet are served in English, they wonder why they should bother further.

● (1005)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Rioux. Thank you all.

Mr. Clarke, it is now over to you.

Mr. Alupa Clarke: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm going to make this very quick since Mrs. Boucher has questions she'd like to ask.

As you know, I'm a man of action. Back in June, I asked the Prime Minister whether he was going to modernize the act before the election, and he answered yes. As I still strive to be a man of action, I have a motion to put forward today in the presence of our witnesses. It reads as follows:

> That the Committee ask the Canada Lands Company to appear regarding the implementation of Part VII of the Official Languages Act, more specifically the consultation of francophone minority school boards in the administration of the surplus federal lands and real property disposal process.

I think it's a motion that will meet with unanimous support, and I hope the committee will vote in favour of it. All the motion does is seek to have representatives of the Canada Lands Company appear before the committee so members can ask questions about the company's administration and when it plans to listen to you, as is required.

Mr. Darrell Samson: I have an amendment to the motion. This would be very useful in my view, given that all the Canada Lands Company is doing is playing by the rules. In other words, it's not necessarily going to consult the French-speaking community if the federal government has not made it clear that it must do so. I always say that people won't rush to offer up solutions on their own if they haven't repeatedly been asked to do so.

I would amend the motion to have the committee invite the President of the Treasury Board at some point, be it before or after the meeting with the Canada Lands Company. The fact is that the act sets out an obligation, so we need to hear what the President of the Treasury Board has to say about it. Of course, it would then be very important to talk to the people at the Canada Lands Company.

The Chair: Mr. Choquette, would you like to comment?

Mr. François Choquette: You can finish your point about the amendment.

The Chair: The amendment would specify that the President of the Treasury Board as well as representatives of the Canada Lands Company appear before the committee. Is that correct?

Mr. Alupa Clarke: That's correct.

Mr. François Choquette: Mr. Chair, I see no problem with having the President of the Treasury Board appear before the committee.

I have here a Radio-Canada article from May 4, 2018. It's about the sale of federal buildings and Senator Gagné's displeasure with the Minister's response. As I see it, the Minister of Public Services and Procurement is the minister responsible for the matter, so I think we should invite her to appear as well.

The Chair: Mr. Arseneault, you have the floor.

Mr. René Arseneault: Would we have all three appear at the same meeting?

● (1010)

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher (Beauport—Côte-de-Beaupré—Île d'Orléans—Charlevoix, CPC): They wouldn't all appear at the same meeting, necessarily.

Mr. Darrell Samson: I agree that the two ministers share the responsibility and that the Canada Lands Company takes care of the allocation. It would be helpful to hear their perspectives. I know they are aware of the issue, but it would be a good idea to hear what they have to say and ask them questions.

The Chair: We are therefore requesting that the President of the Treasury Board, the Minister of Public Services and Procurement—Ms. Qualtrough—and a representative from the Canada Lands Company appear before the committee.

I'll leave it to the clerk to set aside an appropriate time slot in the committee's schedule.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: It should be as soon as possible.

The Chair: Very well.

(Amendment agreed to)

(Motion as amended agreed to [See *Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: Mrs. Boucher, you may go ahead.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: Good morning everyone. I'm very glad to be with you today.

We've discussed a lot, specifically the action plan, of course. I don't know whether it's being written as we speak, but I hope it will be done before the election. I also hope that whichever party is in power after the election, the government continues to support you when it comes to official languages.

We've talked a lot about rights holders and issues involving Statistics Canada. Members on both sides of the House bombarded the people from Statistics Canada with questions that weren't always pleasant. The members of the Standing Committee on Official Languages work well as a team. I must confess that the answers to our questions left me stone cold.

I always ask myself one thing. We give Statistics Canada a lot of freedom to collect data. When it comes to the real numbers on official language minority communities and their day-to-day experience, do you think there's another way, a novel way, to collect that information? I'm talking about a way to paint a much more representative and comprehensive picture of the communities.

Yesterday I spoke with someone in Whitehorse, and that's where the idea to ask this question came from. I don't think it's something that's ever really been asked, either within government or at the community level. Do you think there's a more effective way to go about this? Currently, everything goes through Statistics Canada, but we're seeing a good bit of information being overlooked, whether it pertains to minorities, employment insurance or some other issue. I've met with people from the agency numerous times about all kinds of issues.

I'd like to hear your thoughts on that.

Mr. David Pajot: Thank you for the question.

One option worth considering is having Statistics Canada partner with local universities. The university could be given a specific mandate and then do the work on the ground. Working together on certain questions could be effective. My sense is that, in some cases, the questions are poorly targeted. It always comes down to a political choice. Respondents are asked which language they speak, and it's clearly a political choice. I can easily say I speak English or French.

Earlier I told you that I speak three languages, when I actually speak four every day. As a French speaker here, in B.C., I know it's important to answer that I speak French, but I could just as easily say that I speak Czech or English at home. I speak Czech with my wife, and I speak English at work and with my friends, but less so at home. People need to be aware of the impact of their choice. It's important to explain to people that their answer will have an impact at the national level.

Ms. Marie-France Lapierre: The reason we are calling for changes to the act as far as Statistics Canada goes is that it's the only way to enumerate the vast majority of rights holders, if not all. The information on the language people speak is important, and we've looked at other ways of collecting that information. We've even spoken to the provincial ministry, which now has an obligation to help us seek out those numbers. The ministry sent a letter in support of the changes we are calling for.

Universities were mentioned, but some places are very remote, so it was suggested that people be asked to provide the information online. That proved quite challenging, though, because some people don't use the Internet. We can't rely on churches or schools, because some francophones don't have children.

Before I had children, my community involvement revolved around the arts, but not everyone attends artistic or sporting events. Not even Statistics Canada is able to reach everyone, despite being obligated to do so. In some smaller places, gathering the information will be easier, but it's a lot harder to find an alternative way of enumerating all of B.C.

I'm sorry. Although I like the idea, it's something we've already thought of and explored in terms of solutions.

● (1015)

Mrs. Marie-Andrée Asselin: My intervention will be brief.

We talked about a permanent structure. There is no structure more permanent than Statistics Canada. There is also the fact that the statistics provided by Statistics Canada are authoritative. Statistics Canada publishes evidence-based facts that can be trusted. I don't know who else could have such convincing statistics.

Mr. Jean-François Packwood: Indeed, Statistics Canada was mentioned because it is the body equipped to collect figures.

Honestly, I don't have an answer, but we should open up the dialogue. There should be a much more direct and sustained exchange between Statistics Canada and the francophone and anglophone minority communities. The dialogue should be much more fluid. Currently, there are censuses, we wait for the data, we receive it, and that's it.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: Have you already established a dialogue with Statistics Canada, or has there been very little?

Mr. Jean-François Packwood: Yes, we have, but the scope of the subjects is fairly broad. There should be a much more sustained dialogue.

Ms. Marie-France Lapierre: At the Conseil scolaire francophone de la Colombie-Britannique, when we took a case to court, we hired someone to find research to assess how many francophones there are to justify the existence of schools. The judge told us very clearly that, although the figures we had presented seemed valid, they would not be accepted because they did not come from Statistics Canada.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: And so it's a good thing?

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mrs. Boucher.

The last intervention goes to you, Mr. Samson.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you very much.

Again, I appreciate the fact that the witnesses are here today. It allows our committee to formally write a report that requests answers from the government. These answers will enable us to follow up.

According to the report by the Conseil scolaire francophone, the change to the Official Languages Act should clearly set out a duty to consult with respect to the lands. That's really the key. This is a long-term and essential solution not only in British Columbia, but also elsewhere in Canada and in the territories.

You say the following in your report:

> However … the federal government's Action Plan … merely reiterates that the sale and transfer of federal property is complex and proposes no … solutions.

The solution may result from an amendment to the Official Languages Act. It would be a great victory across Canada. You've identified some interesting things in your testimony today. I would add that we can never get enough testimony, because we need to collect data. We are building something and that is why I mentioned data earlier.

The judge said that the data was not sufficient and that formal data was needed. It is quite clear that the judge should have looked at the case law and waited until the next census to ensure that these questions had been answered. This already exists in the common law.

How much time do I have left, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You have two minutes left.

Mr. Darrell Samson: I just wanted to highlight this point, which is really crucial.

The other point has to do with the linguistic cause, which is essential.

Mr. Arseneault, do you want to add anything?

Mr. René Arseneault: Since we have been here—and since we have been on this committee—we have heard witnesses talk about the watchdog role of the Official Languages Act.

We haven't talked about it today. I would like your comments.

I made good use of the expression "watchdog". A dog has many teeth.

So I would like to hear from you quickly on that.

● (1020)

Ms. Marie-France Lapierre: This watchdog should be given a good set of dentures, because he currently doesn't have any teeth.

Mr. René Arseneault: Are there any other comments? Tell us about your thoughts on this.

Mr. Marc-André Ouellette: It's simple. The way things work now, powers are given to one entity, and oversight to another. We should take a closer look. You can't be judge and jury all the time.

Currently, the Commissioner of Official Languages can conduct investigations. It is all there, but in fact and in the act, the real power lies elsewhere, not within the Office of the Commissioner. I think we should sort this out as soon as possible.

Ladies and gentlemen, the power to act is in your hands. You have the power to do so, and that is important. Otherwise, we will meet again in five years and we will talk about it again.

There you have it.

Ms. Marie-France Lapierre: We have already submitted a written recommendation. We could send it to you, in French and English.

Mr. René Arseneault: Mr. Pajot, would you like to add anything?

Mr. David Pajot: I think it's necessary to raise public awareness. I'm talking about the people of British Columbia, but it must be the same thing elsewhere. We are part of a population that is very diverse, and it will be more and more so in the future.

Many people here, including close friends, see no interest in having a francophone presence in British Columbia. We are very far from Ottawa, Quebec, Moncton.

When we go to a bookstore—I am thinking in particular of a large bookstore in the region—we find that books in French are filed in the foreign book section. It is simply a matter of social representation in society.

In British Columbia and, once again, perhaps elsewhere in Canada, we are in real need of an effort to raise public awareness of the francophone fact.

The Chair: Thank you very much, everyone.

We are going to suspend until 10:45 a.m.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you very much for your presentations. I think they are very helpful.

Mrs. Boucher, do you have something brief to add?

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: Yes.

I'm going to ask the witnesses something. It may embarrass everyone, but I'm going to talk about politics.

Do you think the Commissioner of Official Languages should be apolitical?

A voice: No, this has never been the case.

Mr. David Pajot: It's like asking a researcher to be disinterested. It is very difficult.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: Yes, I know.

It's difficult, but it is possible.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Boucher.

Again, thank you to the witnesses for their presentations. They are very helpful to our committee.

We will suspend.

● _____ (Pause) _____

●

● (1045)

The Chair: We are resuming the meeting.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108, we are continuing our study of the Action Plan for Official Languages 2018-23: Investing in Our Future.

We are pleased to welcome Glyn Lewis, from Canadian Parents for French, Yvon Laberge, from Educacentre College, Robert Rothon, from the Fédération des francophones de la Colombie-Britannique, Brian Conway, from RésoSanté Colombie-Britannique, and Donald Cyr, from the Société de développement économique de la Colombie-Britannique.

Gentlemen, welcome. We'll listen to your testimonies for about five minutes and then, as usual, we'll go around the table so that my colleagues can ask questions and make comments.

We'll start with Mr. Cyr.

Mr. Donald Cyr (Executive Director, Société de développement économique de la Colombie-Britannique): If you wish. I didn't know I was supposed to make a presentation, so I will make some notes. Could you start with someone else instead?

The Chair: No problem. You'll see that we are very flexible.

So we'll start with Glyn Lewis.

Mr. Glyn Lewis (Executive Director, Canadian Parents for French - British Columbia, & Yukon): Thank you very much.

My name is Glyn Lewis, and I am the Executive Director of Canadian Parents for French — British Columbia and Yukon. I think this is the second time I've appeared before your committee.

I will speak to you in English, but I invite you to ask your questions in French. It will give me a chance to practise speaking French a bit.

● (1050)

[*English*]

I don't want to reiterate too much of what I said last time—I think it was about a year ago that we met—but I will summarize some of the key points and then obviously put them within the context of the announcement of the official languages action plan.

First of all, I want to start by thanking the Government of Canada for its commitments in the action plan. I think there were some bold and important funding commitments and some new priorities and initiatives in the action plan that are going to help us. I think it was very much reflective of some of the things that we had been mentioning to this committee and to the government before, in terms of priorities that we saw in the community. I just wanted to start by thanking the government for listening and for recognizing some of the things that we have identified over the years.

The context, from our organizational perspective, is that we promote French as a second language, which makes us different from some of the other organizations that you've heard here today. We promote programs such as French immersion and core French. These are not constitutionally protected programs. The programs are considered to be "by choice", and I put "by choice" in quotation marks. The good news is that in British Columbia and in Yukon, we have seen phenomenal growth in French as a second language programs for almost 20 years now. I think that's a wonderful testament to bilingualism in Canada and the promotion of our two official languages.

Specifically, for French immersion, we've seen 20 years of growth. There are now over 53,000 students in this province in French immersion programs, which is just about 9.5% of the entire student body. That's an incredible development, and we're actually celebrating 50 years of French immersion this coming year here in British Columbia.

On the core French side, there are about 170,000 students learning French, typically between grades 6 and 8. Now, the challenge that I identified last time I met with the committee is that because of all of this phenomenal demand and all of this growth in French as a second language programs here in B.C., one of the things we've seen is a very serious shortage of French teachers.

Our organization estimates that we are short today roughly 100 to 150 French teachers in the province of British Columbia, and we believe that this has a detrimental impact on two fronts. One is in terms of accessibility of the program. Here in Vancouver, a year and a half ago the Vancouver School Board cut one-quarter of their entire French immersion program, which was oversubscribed, because they said that they couldn't find enough French teachers. That means hundreds and eventually thousands of little kids here in Vancouver are going to be turned away from learning French through the French immersion program because they said they couldn't find enough French teachers. We don't think that's acceptable.

The other way that this has an impact is on the quality of instruction. As soon as school districts can't find enough French teachers, in some situations they start putting teachers into classrooms who might not feel comfortable teaching the subject. We believe that potentially has a detrimental impact on the quality of instruction and the quality of learning.

That was one major thing that we mentioned to this committee last year. I was very pleased to see that the action plan has $31 million set aside for French teacher recruitment and retention strategies over the course of the action plan. We think that's going to help not just in B.C. but all across Canada, because this French teacher shortage is a pan-Canadian problem now.

We've identified a number of different strategies that include recruitment, including recruitment in other provinces to recruit teachers here to B.C. but also out-of-country recruitment. We think recruitment is one important pillar to address this French teacher shortage.

The second one is to train more teachers here in our post-secondary institutions, and the third pillar to address this French teacher shortage is retention, doing better to support teachers and to help them stay in the classrooms. I have a brief on this that has much more detail and I will submit to the clerk so that the committee members can have it and can read over some of the recommendations. I think this is important, because within the context of the $31 million that has been set aside for French teacher recruitment and retention, the question now is what we prioritize, and I think that's going to be a very important conversation going forward.

That's my five minutes, and I'll just leave it there.

[*Translation*]

Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Glyn.

[*Translation*]

We will now go to Yvon Laberge.

● (1055)

Mr. Yvon Laberge (President, Educacentre College): Good morning, Mr. Chair, honourable MPs and members of the Standing Committee on Official Languages, dear colleagues and participants present.

Mr. Chairman, first of all, I would like to thank you for inviting us, on behalf of the board of directors of Educacentre College, of which I am president.

A non-profit organization since 1992, Educacentre College was designated as a private college by the British Columbia Ministry of Advanced Education, Skills and Training in 2015. Our institution is the only French-language college in British Columbia. Educacentre College is a key contributor to the implementation of the continuum of lifelong learning and education in French in this province.

The college offers college-level training services, continuing education and basic training in French. It is not a traditional training institution, as we normally understand it. In addition to training services, we offer students services and resources that include, among other things, academic and career counselling, employment assistance services, and immigrant orientation and integration services. The global and integrated model used at Educacentre College allows us to direct our participants to various services and training within the college, but also within the francophone community. If services are not available in the francophone community, we look to the broader community according to the needs expressed.

Educacentre College will benefit from funding under the Action Plan for Official Languages 2018-2023: Investing in our Future. We draw attention to increased investments in areas such as early childhood. In the federal-provincial agreement, the college is recognized as a training institution. In the health field, the college is recognized as an institution that can develop and offer new courses and programs to facilitate and encourage access to French-language health services in British Columbia.

With regard to immigration, we can already see that language training services—in French and English—namely the LINC and CLIC courses, are expanding and that integration and reception services are being improved. Funding for literacy and essential skills can also be accessed through Employment and Social Development Canada.

In this regard, I would like to thank the committee. The study and report you produced on this subject have helped us enormously in accessing this funding. Your recognition of the social aspect of literacy and essential skills has ensured that the department's social development component will contribute to the funding of literacy and skills courses. Many thanks to you.

If, in these areas of intervention, we benefit from increased funding and diversification of funding sources, it is partly due to the interventions and recommendations of the Standing Committee on Official Languages. However, all good things need to be improved. Educacentre College does not receive core funding. In our case, the funds obtained from the Ministry of Education come from the federal government through bilateral agreements under the official languages in education program. To my knowledge, the federal funds provided through this program have not been increased for more than 15 years. If we take into account the increase in the cost of living and inflation, this is actually a decrease in the federal contribution. This situation is worsened by the fact that needs are increasing, registrations are growing, and we want to increase our offer of services and programs.

In addition, the federal government has for several years adopted a strategy of transferring certain responsibilities for the provision of services that fall under federal jurisdiction to the provinces and territories through federal-provincial agreements.

● (1100)

Responsibility for the application of and compliance with the Official Languages Act is therefore transferred to the provincial and territorial governments. The enforcement of the act in British Columbia by existing governments is not as rigorous as it could be. Service delivery models are developed by the majority using the majority lens, without consulting the minority.

Two main areas of devolution affect Educacentre College more directly. In the early childhood sector, we are subject to the same standards as English-language colleges. It is assumed that the training programs are already developed and have been approved by the professional order. In the case of employment, francophones are defined as a specialized population, just like young people facing multiple barriers to employment, such as people with physical disabilities or indigenous people. We do not consider the fact that francophones can be young and face multiple barriers. These may include young people with physical disabilities. We also serve indigenous people.

In addition, the delivery model requires francophones to present themselves as subcontractors in about 20 geographical areas, making it almost impossible for the francophone community to provide services.

These are just two examples of issues that concern us. We hope that the renewal of the Official Languages Act will partly address our concerns.

It is important to be able to count on the committee's support to back up our demands that the language clauses in devolution agreements to the provinces and territories be strengthened and that stronger means be provided to ensure that these clauses are respected.

Once again, I sincerely thank you for inviting me here today. I will be delighted to answer your questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Laberge.

Now it is Robert Rothon's turn.

Mr. Robert Rothon (Executive Director, Fédération des francophones de la Colombie-Britannique): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Fédération des francophones de la Colombie-Britannique is delighted to welcome you to its territory, in a way. It isn't every day that a committee travels outside Ottawa. We thank you for this effort and encourage you to continue this initiative across the country.

I will summarize some of the main elements of the brief we submitted to the committee. If time permits, I will add one or two new elements.

Basically, we have tried to answer the questions the committee asked.

Overall, the federation is satisfied with the content of the action plan, since it contains much of what the francophone community asked for during the consultations held in 2016, namely a commitment by the government to official language minority communities.

Of course, the objectives of this plan, which is very ambitious, will only be achievable if a substantial financial effort is made. This is all the more true since investments in official languages have stagnated for 12 years, in a province where the cost of living is among the highest in Canada and growing year after year. I would like to come back to this point if I can, since it affects some of the service delivery methods included in the action plan.

We are satisfied with the way in which consultations and meetings have been conducted since 2016. I must say that, since the implementation of the action plan, the federation has also been satisfied with its interaction with Canadian Heritage officials, and I can give you some concrete examples, as well as with IRCC officials, another example worth highlighting.

We think it is a little early to say if there are any areas that are not in the action plan, but that would deserve special attention. However, we have immediate concerns about the lack of mention of federal-provincial agreements, in particular with respect to the following elements: specified and verifiable linguistic obligations, a clear and transparent accountability process and a willingness to specify positive measures under part VII of the act, including through regulations.

I will probably echo what has already been said this morning, but the education sector has informed me of its concern about the financial impact of the delay in signing federal-provincial agreements on certain higher education institutions. We can come back to this point. In our opinion, these agreements should provide for mechanisms for the involvement of professional orders in order to facilitate the recognition of diplomas acquired outside Canada. I would like to pick up on the point raised by Glyn Lewis and my colleagues in the education sector.

As it is a little early to evaluate the action plan, it may not be easy to know how to improve it at this stage. However, we want there to be a monitoring mechanism that involves our communities throughout the life of the action plan. We would like to take advantage of the action plan to renegotiate the Canada-community agreements, now tacit agreements that are renewable annually, and make them official, so that the communities also have their mechanisms in place under the action plan.

I would also like to mention that we just had a regional immigration summit with IRCC last week. We are delighted with the cultural shift that this department is taking by developing a service approach designed by and for key stakeholders. I think this is something that cannot be overemphasized. Until the arrival of this policy or measure, immigration, overall, had contributed to the assimilation of francophones outside Quebec. In fact, immigration to Canada was a way of assimilating francophones. I think that was an unexpected consequence. The government now has objectives, a strategic plan and a mechanism date, and that is quite commendable.

● (1105)

In conclusion, we are very satisfied with the efforts made by the government in the action plan. However, there are still systemic barriers that this plan does not seem to address, and we can discuss them later. Before I conclude, I will simply point out the decision of Judge Gascon of the Federal Court against the federation last spring, in which the whole of part VII was called into question.

For us, this means that the overhaul or modernization of the Official Languages Act becomes, for the future of our communities, a crucial issue and a heavy responsibility for the government and for all parties, since we want to see all parties commit to modernizing this legislation and support any effort to that end.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Rothon.

We're now going to hear from Brian Conway.

Dr. Brian Conway (President and Medical Doctor, RésoSanté Colombie-Britannique): Thank you very much, members of the committee and fellow stakeholders.

As president of RésoSanté Colombie-Britannique and director of the Centre médical francophone de Vancouver, I'd like to begin by thanking you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

The Action Plan for Official Languages 2018-23: Investing in Our Future is, in my view, vital to the future of the francophone community here, in the province. The action plan sets out investments that are more than 20% greater than those in the previous roadmap. If properly targeted, these funding commitments will make it possible to meet the expectations of many in our community, expectations that have been clearly laid out. For these people, their quality of life, sense of belonging and hope for a bright future, as Mr. Trudeau says, are largely dependent on access to services, resources and community activities in French.

This is especially important in health care, where language goes hand in hand with the delivery of optimal services. In other words, people have the right to be sick in their mother tongue, French. The action plan makes clear the importance of innovative projects in improving access to French-language health services.

Working at the St. Boniface Hospital, as a very young infectious disease specialist—longer ago than I care to admit—I could clearly see how well this type of infrastructure served the francophone community. Its existence was entirely warranted given the geography and size of Manitoba's francophone community. That isn't the case here, in B.C., however, where the community is far more spread out and diverse, I would say. Regardless, one thing is clear: the community is growing. I hope I'm not about to contradict what the school board told you, but it serves more than 6,000 students and has seen its student body increase by more than 25% over the past five years.

When people tell you that B.C.'s francophone community is in decline, you should know that is absolutely not true. More and more families are choosing to live in French and enrol their children in French-language schools. This really highlights how important French is to us. All those people are entitled to receive health services in the language of Molière.

How are we going to deliver those services? RésoSanté Colombie-Britannique put together a directory of health care professionals who wish to serve patients in French. Nearly two weeks ago, we released the latest edition of the directory, and I can tell you that more than 2,000 professionals in every corner of the province have expressed their desire to serve people in French. That's right, I said 2,000, so the supply is clearly there.

Over the past five years, I've had the pleasure of establishing the Centre médical francophone de Vancouver, located just two blocks from here. If you ever have the chance, whether during this visit or another, I encourage you to come by for a visit. The medical centre was integrated into an existing clinic. The centre is well-recognized by the community as a point of service for French-language health care. In the course of a year, we can accommodate more than 1,600 visits from francophones who use the medical centre as a gateway. You might liken it to a much smaller version of St. Boniface Hospital; it's a much smaller institution delivering a much more limited range of services.

What can we accomplish over the next five years? As I see it, the challenge is really to match supply with demand and use the directory as a tool. People will use the centre as a gateway. We use the directory to refer them to health professionals who have made clear their desire to serve patients in French. New techniques like telemedicine can be used to serve those who live in remote areas. The action plan is explicit about improving access to health services, and this may be one way of doing that. It's something we need to recognize, because we need to create the infrastructure to improve those services.

The second thing I want to draw your attention to is that the action plan mentions the need for better access to mental health and addiction services.

You are currently in the heart of the opiate crisis. Keep in mind that, every day in this province, more than four people die as a result of opiate overdoses. You may have seen on the news that, on July 27 alone, 130 people in the Downtown Eastside overdosed and required medical attention. Think about it: 130 overdoses in the span of 24 hours. That's a serious problem. Now think about this: 7% of the population in the Downtown Eastside identifies as francophone. That's roughly 1,500 people we could reach more effectively if we were able to provide health services to them in French.

● (1110)

The research group at the Centre médical francophone de Vancouver has identified a number of shelters where nearly 25% of the incoming clientele in a single evening are francophone. Not only are there many of them, but also, they appear to gather in the same places.

We've set up a temporary community clinic, as a pilot, in an effort to encourage these people to access health care. By promoting and expanding these kinds of projects, we are able not just to offer more French-language services, as the public is demanding, but also to address a major crisis.

In closing, I want to underscore how important it is to find ways of improving health care services in French. If we do our job properly, public health will improve so much so that the English-speaking community around us will want to adopt our best practices. That is our goal.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Conway.

I will now turn the floor over to Donald Cyr.

Mr. Donald Cyr (Executive Director, Société de développement économique de la Colombie-Britannique): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good morning.

I came here to listen. I didn't know I would be addressing the committee. That's my fault. We just celebrated our 20th anniversary, so I haven't really had time to read all my emails in the past three months.

That said, I'd like to focus more on the Société de développement économique de la Colombie-Britannique, or SDE for short.

Gil Rémillard, a former Quebec minister and founder of the International Economic Forum of the Americas—one of the largest forums in the world—said something that really struck me: the standing of a language is in direct proportion to its economic power.

Say what you will, but when a person doesn't work, they lose their dignity. I believe economic integration is essential. It's the only way for a person to keep their integrity within a community. If a person comes here and does not work, they lose their standing. Bear in mind that 87% or 88%—forgive me, I don't have the exact figures, having not prepared for this—of francophones in B.C. come from away. When a francophone comes here, it's essential that they be able to either start their own business or find employment in order to integrate into community life.

During the economic forum that just took place, one thing that came up again and again was an individual's need to adapt to their community. Technology, immigration and ways to adapt are recurring topics of discussion.

The SDE partners with a number of anglophone groups. Our mission is to educate employers about the economic integration of francophones who come to B.C. Last year, we were able to educate 1,700 businesses, in B.C. alone, support the start-up of 350 businesses and deliver pertinent training. We work with Collège Éducacentre, but we also do a lot of one-time training. We've seen more than 750 people. We do a lot to help integrate francophones who are not from here into the economy. Without that integration, they can't go any farther.

Since our operating budget hasn't increased in eight to 10 years, we have to limit our service offerings to Vancouver. All over the province, though, the demand for the kind of expertise we provide is huge, from both a training and business creation standpoint. We don't have the capacity to serve the entire province, however, given that the funding we receive is enough to cover only Vancouver.

I looked at the upcoming plan, and it doesn't contain all that much in terms of economic measures, so I'd like to see more along those lines. I'm speaking for my own bailiwick, of course, but it bears repeating that the strength of a language is in direct proportion to its economic capacity. Without that capacity or the services needed to integrate all the francophone newcomers into our economy, the effort isn't worth the trouble.

Thank you.

● (1115)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Cyr.

Thank you to the witnesses for their presentations.

We will now move right into the question and answer portion.

Ms. Boucher, you may go ahead.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: Good morning all. Thank you for being here today.

Thank you, Mr. Conway. What you said made me very glad. I fought very hard for French-language health care services back when I was Josée Verner's parliamentary secretary. I remember coming here to provide funding for a study exploring the creation of a small hospital. You've just told us that, today, that hospital exists. Congratulations.

Dr. Brian Conway: Thank you for your support.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: It was something the community needed. I remember talking a lot about it.

We talk a lot about French-language health care in this committee. It's an issue I cared deeply about when I was a parliamentary secretary, and still do today.

As you said, the new action plan sets out funding for French-language health services. Do you have any concerns about how those initiatives will be implemented into health care programs? Are there other measures we should be looking at so that members of minority communities—in this case, francophones in Vancouver—can access health services in their language more easily? It remains a challenge.

Dr. Brian Conway: Naturally, I wanted to share success stories with you, but we do indeed continue to face major challenges.

It's not so much of a legal issue for us. We simply think that, in order to improve the health of a certain population, it's necessary to deliver health services in the best possible way from the very first moment a person seeks out those services. Part of doing that is serving a person in their mother tongue. It's an approach that is well-suited to this area, when you consider the non-francophone and non-anglophone linguistic minorities that surround us. If we develop good programs in French, the underlying structure will be of use to all the other communities, no matter their language, Chinese, Punjabi and so forth.

With this attitude, we are able to open up a dialogue that will probably help us achieve the goal we all share: delivering French-language services to anyone who wants them. I think we're on the right track. We need to continue down this path with a view to improving the health of these populations. This approach has served us well thus far, as opposed to one based on demands.

● (1120)

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: Oftentimes, a community isn't aware of all the available resources, be they French or English.

Does the francophone community know that you exist and that it can easily access health services in French?

Dr. Brian Conway: We have a directory, and we do the best we can. That said, I will ask Mr. Rothon to answer your question. It's possible to be so close to the issue that you lack perspective.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: I ask because, in my community, people don't seem to realize even though it's well indicated.

Mr. Robert Rothon: I'll do my best to answer your question.

I take for granted that the francophone population, which is made up largely of newcomers and immigrants, is always learning about the existence of French-language services. Upon arriving in B.C., people automatically expect that all the services are provided in English, so the effort to promote French-language services never ends. I would say that, with the tools and resources at our disposal, we manage to reach a good chunk of the population. Do we reach everyone? No. Do we reach the majority? Probably not.

I do, however, know that RésoSanté Colombie-Britannique gives a lot of thought to the advertising of health services. I think any sector that provides little-known services is confronted with the same challenge. That's certainly true of immigration.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: Thank you.

Mr. Chair, do I have any time left?

The Chair: You still have a few minutes on the clock.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: Great.

You talked about promotion and advertising. When you live in a minority community and you often have to fight to be served in French, how do you promote the French fact? Coming from Quebec, where the majority is French-speaking, I don't have that problem. How are you able to reach people so that they are able to access your services?

Mr. Robert Rothon: That question could easily be directed to everyone.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: Indeed, others should feel free to answer as well.

Advertising is a huge advantage in a minority setting. In each of your spheres of activity, how do you make sure people know that you exist and that you need them, and that you are there for them if they need you?

Mr. Robert Rothon: Since my microphone is on, I'll go first, and then I'll turn the floor over to the others.

In our case, we do two types of advertising. Of course, we use all the online tools. Considering how spread out our population is, it's quite an effective approach. It's worth noting that we've been very successful on that front. I imagine other organizations that have done the same will have similar success stories to share.

This summer, we began doing community-based education and promotion by taking part in popular culture events intended mainly for anglophones and allophones. The idea was to make the majority population aware of our existence. We also realized that newcomers often participate in these kinds of events, so it's a first point of contact.

For instance, we participated in the popular celebration held in the Khatsahlano neighbourhood. Mr. Clarke may be familiar with it. This area in the city's west end has a lot of French-speaking newcomers, so by the time we left, we had about 50 people who had signed up to take advantage of our services. All we invested time-wise was a single day. Sometimes highly targeted efforts can prove highly successful.

● (1125)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Rothon.

You may go ahead, Mr. Arseneault.

Mr. René Arseneault: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you all for going to the trouble to be here today.

Again, welcome Mr. Lewis and Mr. Cyr. This is the second time we've seen you.

Unless I'm mistaken, Mr. Cyr, you're originally from the Republic of Madawaska.

Mr. Donald Cyr: I am from its capital, Edmundston.

Mr. René Arseneault: Earlier you shared some incredible statistics that bear witness to the work you have done in economic development. You provided information and insight to some 700 enterprises in British Columbia about the integration of francophone employees, and 350 were given training in this area. You also provided assistance to some 750 individuals. All of that work takes human and financial resources.

Who provides the financial support to do this type of field work with entrepreneurs?

Mr. Donald Cyr: Our funding comes from two main sources. Western Economic Diversification, WD, provides funds to allow us to offer services directly to the businesses, and do training. The other half of our operating funds come from ESDC, Employment and Social Development Canada. These funds are used to find projects. Our immigration, career objective and newcomer support projects are funded by ESDC.

Mr. René Arseneault: WD is a federal sub-agency, correct?

Mr. Donald Cyr: Yes.

Mr. René Arseneault: So your funds all come from a single provider, the federal government, even if there are two different departments involved.

Mr. Donald Cyr: Yes. We often work with the province, but it does not provide the bulk of our funding. We work directly with the province on tourism. We receive funds to promote British Columbia in France and in Quebec.

Mr. René Arseneault: I see, but you use funds from WD.

Mr. Donald Cyr: We do receive some provincial funds, but we receive more from Western Diversification.

Mr. René Arseneault: Fine.

I'd like a short answer to my next question, because I want to ask questions of the other witnesses.

The Standing Committee on Official Languages has been discussing the coming modernization the Official Languages Act. Are there any amendments to that act that could help your organization?

Mr. Donald Cyr: Absolutely. We would really need to receive more funds from the Department of Industry. We would also like to receive more funds from Western Economic Diversification Canada. In fact, what we would like to have, basically, is more funds.

I will also answer the question on what we do to promote our services so that people know about us.

We work directly with the Greater Vancouver Board of Trade, with the Vancouver Economic Commission, Small Business BC, and Community Futures British Columbia. We have memorandums of understanding with those organizations; when francophones arrive in these organizations, they send them to us. We don't need to make the first contacts because they have already been made. Essentially, we need additional funds in order to be able to provide more services.

Mr. René Arseneault: Fine, thank you.

Mr. Lewis, yesterday we visited an immersion school in the Yukon that was bursting at the seams, in Whitehorse, more specifically. It was an old building but it was jam-packed with people learning French.

You have testified before, but regarding the modernization of the Official Languages Act we are about to undertake, I would like you to tell us what priority amendments you would like to see to that act, amendments that would help the cause of francophones or francophiles who want to receive their education in French, from primary school to high school.

[*English*]

Mr. Glyn Lewis: Since the last time I presented to this committee, I've had a chance to meet with Mr. Samsonin Ottawa. We talked a little bit about this, and what I mentioned was that I went through French immersion here in Burnaby, and today, if I wanted my kids to go into the same program, they're not guaranteed that right. I would have to line up, and in some cases I would have to put my name in a lottery to try to get them in.

My argument—and I think our argument—is that it seems systematically unfair in a bilingual country that people who love the language, who have learned the language, and who promote the language can't get their own kids into these programs for sure. With respect to the modernization of the act, I think that's something to look at.

● (1130)

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Arseneault: In summary, you are saying that the right to education in French, and even immersion, should be a guaranteed right, since French is one of the two official languages.

Mr. Glyn Lewis: Yes.

Mr. René Arseneault: Thank you.

Mr. Rothon, I don't have time to ask you about the origins of your name, but perhaps we can talk about it again later.

I imagine that your federation is the umbrella organization for several others. Who are the main French-promoting actors and organizations you represent?

Mr. Robert Rothon: We have about 40 members. All of the sectors are represented, of course.

Mr. René Arseneault: So, health, education, the arts, culture and sports are all represented.

Mr. Robert Rothon: As well as social services. Everyone is there.

You asked what we would like to see in a modernized version of the Official Languages Act, and my answer is that insofar as we are concerned, it's simple. Of course because of the Gascon ruling—if the members of the committee have not read that ruling, I strongly encourage them to read it—our concerns centre around Part VII of the act. It involves positive measures, their status, their place in the act and the way in which they are interpreted and implemented. This is a major concern for us.

In a related matter, there are the negotiated agreements between the federal level and the provinces and territories to decentralize federal powers. That is a concern for us, because at least in British Columbia, those transfers are sometimes catastrophic for the community, and there's no point denying it. That whole system could stand to be reviewed.

To follow up on Mr. Lewis's comments, I think that the new version of the act must take into account the fact that Canada has evolved a great deal since 1969. Linguistic communities are less watertight than they used to be. Canadians are literally more connected, which was not the case 50 years ago. We also have to take the whole phenomenon of bilingualism as such into account, and the way in which it aligns with a francophone or anglophone identity.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Choquette, you have the floor.

Mr. François Choquette: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank all of you for being here with us. Some of you are appearing before the committee for a second time.

I thank you for your proposals concerning the Official Languages Act and the action plan.

I have two articles here.

First, I will read an excerpt from an FFCB press release dated June 22, 2018:

> What is even more worrisome according to the judge is that Part VII of the OLA does not impose any specific or particular obligations on federal institutions, because nothing in the language used is specific in any way. The federal government consequently has only to adopt measures that are not negative to meet its obligations under the OLA. These conclusions are the most recent evidence of gaps in the OLA, and of the fact that it needs to be modernized.

This decision you received was like being hit on the head with a hammer. It's enormous. It says that the positive measures don't mean anything, that this is an empty shell, and that basically Part VII, with regard to positive measures, imposes no requirements. This is extremely serious. It could have consequences at all levels, not only for you in British Columbia but for all of the official language communities everywhere in the country. Yes, I agree with you; all of the members of the committee must read that decision. This seems very grave to me.

Under the current government the Standing Committee on Official Languages barely has six months to act before the next election. In six months we can't do everything.

You have the action plan before you. I have another article, which I mentioned earlier, but I'll read the title anyway. It's an article published by #ONfr entitled "Francophone organizations still waiting for promised funds". The funds promised in May have not yet been distributed.

We also spoke about education, where there has not been an increase since 2003, despite the crying needs. You mentioned this.

Mr. Rothon, what urgent priority would you like to share with the committee regarding Part VII? Could you explain this to us?

● (1135)

Mr. Robert Rothon: If you don't mind, first I'll answer your comment concerning the timing of the Action Plan funds.

Like most of my colleagues around this table, we have just received a letter from the Minister of Canadian Heritage assuring us that the additional funds will be sent to us soon. We are happy about that. We would certainly have liked those funds to come sooner, but now it seems they are on the way. All in all, we are rather satisfied.

As for Part VII, we consulted our partners, lawyers and other experts on the matter regarding the possibility of asking, for instance, that Part VII be updated even before the modernization of the entire Official Languages Act. They were strongly against this, simply because the act is so complex that even a small surgical intervention —I'm a little embarrassed to use that term in the presence of Dr. Conway—would not be realistic. We were told that we would risk causing unexpected results that could be more or less unfortunate, and that it was better to wait.

I think the federation would be happy if all of the parties, through a statement by the party leaders, simply expressed a commitment by saying that they do see the need to modernize the Official Languages Act, and want to ensure the survival, vitality and flourishing of the official language minority communities by strengthening the current Part VII. We would like to avoid—and here I am speaking simply as the representative of the community sector—that this recasting of the Official Languages Act become a purely electoral issue. This goes far beyond political partisanship for us. It's really fundamental, and essential for our communities. We would really like the political milieu to recognize that as well.

The Chair: Mr. Choquette, you have the floor.

Mr. François Choquette: I think Mr. Laberge wanted to speak.

Mr. Yvon Laberge: When the funds are sent is a very important issue. I'd like to discuss two components of the process that are complementary.

Bilateral agreements on education last five years and are renewable. We began the renewal process when the last agreement expired on March 31, 2018. We are now in September 2018 and we still have no news about that dossier. There are two components to the process. First, a national protocol is negotiated by all of the provinces and territories. Then, once the national protocol has been agreed upon, negotiations begin with every province and territory.

Six months down the road, the Collège Éducacentre has still not received any funds, and I think that Canadian Parents for French and the Fédération des parents francophones de Colombie-Britannique are in the same boat. And so we have to find funding from another source to support our activities. These funds will probably be reimbursed, but we aren't sure of that. When the previous agreement was renewed, we had to wait 14 months before the funds arrived. Our pockets are not deep enough to wait that long.

Luckily we had access to funds in the area of health and health training. Today we are in month six, and we are submitting our proposal to Health Canada. We don't expect an agreement to be negotiated for a few months, and we think we are going to be forced to spend our funds. Let me explain that. Public servants will divide our overall subsidy into five parts and tell us that we must spend this or that amount. In February, they will probably tell us that we have two months to spend what should have been spent throughout the year. Indeed, unless things have changed, we don't have the right to carry over the unspent funds from one fiscal year to the next. Personally, I don't think this is the best way to use the funds that are provided to us.

● (1140)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now hear from Mr. Samson.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you very much for your presentation. It's so important to hear people from the field describe their successes, but also the challenges they have to meet. Since we are in the very midst of reviewing the Official Languages Act, this is a good time to talk about all of that.

Mr. Rothon, I think it was you who said that we should avoid political partisanship since the Official Languages Act is neutral. I agree with you. If the three political parties agree on a platform for the OLA, this will help the minority francophone communities. This will force debate and discussion. Exchanges on priorities can enrich the discussion.

Mr. Lewis, it's always a pleasure to see you again. You didn't agree with my solution to your small problem, because that isn't exactly what you wanted to do. Nevertheless, I fully agree with you. I was happy to see this school in downtown Whitehorse with its 500 immersion students. You gave a good explanation of the expansion of your facilities, and you expressed your opinion on the changes to be made to the Official Languages Act on bilingualism and access to education. There's no doubt that access to education in French is essential.

As the representative of the Conseil scolaire francophone said, I think that if we can begin to recruit immersion students, even before they finish high school, if we can get them interested in studying to become French teachers, that will lead to the creation of the needed programs. There is a shortage of teachers. One of the best ways of ensuring that there will be another generation of teachers would probably to be to encourage students who are nearing graduation to opt for the teaching profession by giving them bursaries, for instance. The irony of the teacher shortage is that it will disappear in 10 years because everyone will get into this profession once the job offers are posted in the media. That might be a strategy to adopt. I wonder if you ever did anything like that before.

Mr. Glyn Lewis: Yes.

I have a letter I'm going to give the clerk.

[*English*]

One of the recommendations is to target graduates of French immersion programs and French as a first language programs. We know anecdotally that the people we train in our education system—the people who come through our education system and then go into post-secondary—are much more likely to stay as a teacher in the long term. It's partly because they're familiar with the curriculum and partly because they were born in and grew up in those communities. We have lower attrition for teachers when we train them that way.

● (1145)

Mr. Darrell Samson: Yes. A product of the community, someone who comes back to his or her community, will stay. That's very important.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Laberge, you raised the fact that direct investment in post-secondary studies or French-language public schools had not been increased. That is a very important issue and I understand that problem well.

You spoke about the training program for immigrants.

Could you explain the nature of that program? What is its concrete objective, on the ground?

Mr. Yvon Laberge: Thank you very much for the question.

What we've done at the Collège Éducacentre—and we are going to talk about it this afternoon—is put in place a global, integrated model. We noticed that a large part of our clientele was made up of newcomers. We realized it was important to make sure we could support immigrants as soon as they arrived. We have a good program to receive, support and integrate immigrants.

Most of the time, what they are looking for is a job and a place to live, and those are their priorities. When we talk about employment, we start to realize that they may be facing obstacles or have specific needs to better integrate the workplace, and very often what's needed is training, either one-time training or long-term training.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you.

And that leads me to my interest in your area, Mr. Cyr. Mr. Laberge referred to jobs for immigrants.

In the economic sector, what tools does the anglophone majority have to which you do not have access, that could help you better accomplish your mission?

It's a question I could put to any of you, but it's addressed to you, Mr. Cyr, for the moment. I know that in Nova Scotia, it's a problem in some places.

Can you describe the ideal situation? What is present on the anglophone side that you do not have, and that would allow you to reach your goals? Are you consulted or not?

Explain to us what we as a government could do to help you in your work.

Mr. Donald Cyr: Anglophones have credibility and are recognized because they are everywhere. Francophones here represent 1.4% of the population, and that population is distributed evenly across the province.

Mr. Darrell Samson: What can we do to help you? What do you need?

Mr. Donald Cyr: What I need, and what the Société de développement économique de la Colombie-Britannique needs, is simple. We would like our economic contribution to be recognized. The people I work with don't want bilingualism to be seen as a right or an obligation. When I talk to them about bilingualism, I'm talking about an investment. I want people to see us as a way of investing.

I'll give you an example. We have been a major catalyst when it comes to tourism between France and Canada. Tourism increased by 33% in one year, from Paris to Vancouver and from Vancouver to Paris. This yielded economic spinoffs of $12 million in one single year.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Do you have discussions with anglophones?

Often, we aren't consulted. Decisions are made by the majority.

Mr. Donald Cyr: That's right.

We do talk, but the value of our contribution isn't recognized. The Vancouver Airport and the Vancouver Economic Commission know us, and they want to work with us because they see the results and the the economic benefits our work generates. I'm an economist, and I have figures for you. For every dollar we receive, we generate five dollars in economic spinoffs. That does not include the direct contributions of Air France and Air Canada.

If our economic contribution were recognized, it would make a difference. We need to be seen as a business opportunity rather than an obligatory tool.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Samson.

Mr. Rioux, you have the floor.

● (1150)

Mr. Jean Rioux: I thank the witnesses very much for their presence here.

Mr. Cyr, I will continue in the same vein.

If I understand correctly, your organization is comparable to organizations that help businesses, like the CFDCs. Do you face the same problems, which is that you receive renewable operating funds, but as for invested capital, you haven't received anything in 30 years?

Mr. Donald Cyr: That is correct.

We do get more operating funds for projects, but we have the same staff as we had ten years ago.

We are also asked to work in the regions, but we can't, because we have the same staff as we had 10 years ago.

Mr. Jean Rioux: You head up an organization in a minority environment. Does Canada Economic Development recognize the fact that you are a francophone organization in an anglophone environment, since most of your funding comes from that department?

Mr. Donald Cyr: We made a presentation a few months ago to the Assistant Deputy Minister of Western Economic Diversification Canada, or WD. I was joined by my colleagues from three other western provinces.

It was interesting to see the deputy minister's reactions. She said that she did not know we were doing all this.

Mr. Jean Rioux: You say that you are facilitating the economic integration of workers. Will those who are integrated be able to work in a francophone environment? When you start up businesses, are they francophone or is the objective simply economic development?

Mr. Donald Cyr: The vast majority of them are anglophone businesses.

Mr. Jean Rioux: Those you are creating?

Mr. Donald Cyr: Yes.

We are also creating francophone companies. We support small businesses. Those are francophone businesses. That is a program we are managing with WD.

We have another program we are managing jointly with Employment and Social Development Canada, or ESDC. We pay young people over a few months to work in companies and we help immigrants integrate into those companies. We are mostly talking about anglophone companies.

Mr. Jean Rioux: Thank you.

I will move on to another topic.

Mr. Laberge, you talked about early childhood services. You say that the government should grant special status to francophones in that area, as far as I understand. Early childhood services are considered equal, be they francophone or anglophone, even though the needs are different. Can you tell us more about that?

This morning, we have been made very much aware of early childhood services. We were told that four francophone children out of five were assimilated. That seems to be a priority if we want to ensure the survival of French in British Columbia.

Mr. Yvon Laberge: Thank you very much for the question.

I have a clarification to make.

What is important to us are training services for early childhood practitioners. If we want to increase the number of places, for example, in daycares, we have to make sure to have qualified personnel.

Qualified personnel is part of a professional association in the province. Any training program for those people must be approved by the professional association. Certain conditions have to be met, such as obtaining copyrights for a program. So we are assuming that the program has already been developed.

The money earmarked under the agreement is intended for the program offering, but not for its development. We take it for granted that the program has already been developed, while anglophone public colleges receive further funding for program development. This example shows that we need some latitude.

As my colleagues from the francophone school board said earlier, the money has been distributed without any consultations. Had officials consulted us before stating that a certain percentage would go to a certain sector and another percentage to another sector, we could have told them what our needs were. That would have been more effective and would have met our needs better.

● (1155)

Mr. Jean Rioux: The new action plan provides significant funds for early childhood. Does that not give you the money you need to develop early childhood programs?

Mr. Yvon Laberge: For the time being, no.

Mr. Jean Rioux: Okay, thank you.

That will be all for me, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Rioux.

We will move on to Mr. Clarke.

Mr. Alupa Clarke: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good morning, everyone.

Mr. Rothon, I am happy to see you again. What is happening with the decision Mr. Choquette mentioned? An appeal has been appealed, correct?

Mr. Robert Rothon: That's correct. Without going into too much detail, as the case is before the courts, I can confirm that we have used our right of appeal and are currently before the courts in appeal. I also think we are ready to take it as far as the Supreme Court of Canada if necessary.

Mr. Alupa Clarke: According to you, did the situation that is hurting you develop when the government of Christy Clark was in power?

Mr. Robert Rothon: When it happened....

Mr. Alupa Clarke: What I'm actually wondering is whether the current NDP government would take action. What is its opinion on this? Is it known?

The NDP was not in power when the contentious situation developed, right?

Mr. Robert Rothon: No. Since we went to court, the government has changed at both levels—at the federal level and in British Columbia. The current agreements have been standardized by the provincial public service, and they have been renewed or are currently been renewed, so they are in the works at the provincial level. A call for tenders has been launched, and people have responded.

It is interesting to note that this agreement, which concerns employment centres, will continue to treat francophones as a specialized population, and French as an additional language and not an official language. That is entirely part of the provincial government's culture.

Mr. Alupa Clarke: Someone told you that a surgical procedure would be needed—for example, amending part VII or part IV of the act. Who told you that this would lead to many complications? Was it some bureaucrat in Ottawa?

Mr. Robert Rothon: We have conducted consultations. We were looking for an immediate solution or corrective action.

Mr. Alupa Clarke: Me too. I would like to know who told you that.

Mr. Robert Rothon: We have consulted a number of stakeholders —political parties, but also lawyers and constitutional experts. It was rather legal professionals who convinced us that it was better to wait.

Mr. Alupa Clarke: What do you mean by "legal professionals"?

Mr. Robert Rothon: Lawyers.

Mr. Alupa Clarke: Okay, I understand.

Mr. Robert Rothon: They convinced us that the idea itself was interesting, but that the approach was not really realistic in the context of overhauling the act, and that it may have undesirable results for us. According to them, it was better to wait.

Mr. Alupa Clarke: Okay.

There is something I would now like to clarify. Are members of your federation still operating with the funding from the 2018 roadmap or have they already started to receive money from the 2018 action plan?

Mr. Robert Rothon: They are operating somewhat like us—in other words, a number of them have multi-annual agreements.

Mr. Alupa Clarke: I am talking about the money they are receiving.

Mr. Robert Rothon: The agreements date back to the roadmap.

Mr. Alupa Clarke: So there is still no money from the 2018 action plan.

Mr. Robert Rothon: We need to distinguish based on funding sources. Those who receive Heritage Canada's program funding, which has been increased by 20% this year, have nearly all received a letter from minister Joly announcing the imminent arrival of that money.

Currently, the federation and one of the community coordination mechanisms are in consultation with the department's regional office concerning additional funding—the famous $25 million. The money is trickling in slowly. Unfortunately, I am not aware of other amounts that will be provided based on the action plan's timeline.

Mr. Alupa Clarke: One of Ms. Joly's core promises related to the action plan was to increase the proportion of money provided directly to OLMCs. Once you begin to receive money from the action plan, could you check with your members whether, starting in March 2019, there is indeed more money going directly to OLMCs, and let the committee know?

● (1200)

Mr. Robert Rothon: Yes, of course.

Mr. Alupa Clarke: That was one of the key points Ms. Joly brought up in May when she presented the new action plan along with the Prime Minister. I agree with that, and it got all of us excited. We do have to know, however, whether it will be done, and I would like you to get back to us on this.

I also think that the official languages issue must not be politicized and that, to avoid this, the act must absolutely be modernized before the next election. You know very well that I would like the Conservative government to proceed to that modernization after 2019. But I think the official languages issue is so important, Mr. Rothon, that I would be the first to shake Mr. Trudeau's hand and recognize his work if he was to modernize the act before the next election.

Therefore, if you have not done so already, you should write to Ms. Joly and Prime Minister Trudeau to tell them that the act should be modernized before 2019. After all, it is not complicated: everything is already written, there are lawyers all over Parliament Hill, no consultations need to be carried out and we already know what the priorities are. It is very clear, and everywhere we have gone in Canada, we heard what OLMCs wanted: the centralization of power, an administrative tribunal, allocation of enforcement powers to the commissioner, and so on.

Without getting bogged down in details, modernization is ultimately fairly simple. You would really need to push the current government to go ahead with the modernization before the next election, so that the modernization of the act wouldn't need to be made into an election promise. Even if that had to happen, I assure you that I would do everything in my power for that election promise to also be made by the Conservative Party. That way, you would have the choice of voting for one or the other of the two candidates.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Clark. Your time is up.

We are a down-to-earth committee. You shouldn't start dreaming.

Mr. Arsenault, go ahead.

Mr. René Arseneault: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I am touched by the completely non-partisan comments made by my colleague, Mr. Clarke. I am an offspring of official languages: I am from New Brunswick, and I am among those who are still resisting the invaders. Fortunately, I am not alone, as there are many of us.

That said, I think the worst thing we could do would be to rush the modernization of the Official Languages Act by doing it in six months. I think that is the most important piece of legislation in the country.

Dr. Conway, allow me to first congratulate you. You are still practising medicine, correct?

Dr. Brian Conway: Absolutely.

Mr. René Arseneault: Thank you for your commitment as president of RésoSanté in that great province. Mr. Cyr—or was it Mr. Rothon?—was saying earlier that francophones or francophiles accounted for 1.4% of British Columbia's population, and they were spread out over a tremendous territory. You established that network, and you have received 2,000 responses from the professional world. Have dentists also responded to the call, or was it only doctors?

Dr. Brian Conway: No, absolutely not, as representatives of a number of disciplines have responded—physicians, dentists, nurses, physiotherapists, massage therapists, speech therapists—from across the province.

Mr. René Arseneault: I am amazed to learn that 2,000 professionals have answered the call. This means that, across British Columbia, from north to south, there is a demand, there are people who are just waiting for an active offer of services in French. That is my understanding.

Dr. Brian Conway: It's about connecting supply and demand. The inventory has been in place for a dozen years. We did not start out with 2,000 professionals, but with only a few hundred of them. There was a ripple effect: some people found it rewarding to be able to provide services in French, and other professionals registered. The inventory is now part of the provincial landscape, and it is growing. It's important for people to be able to find someone who will provide them with services in French. If someone asks for those services, but they are not available the first time, they will try again a second and then a third time, before they stop asking. That is sort of what connecting supply and demand means.

If, for example, a parent decides to send their child to a school from the francophone school board, and asks for the services of a francophone pediatrician and obtains them, it is very likely that this parent will increasingly want to become integrated into their region's francophonie, as they will see that not only schools are available, but there are also health services, the business world, post-secondary education. In short all sorts of services are available.

Everyone needs health services at some point. Take the example of sixth-grade students who need to get their human papilloma virus vaccine, which is somewhat controversial. If their school used a francophone nurse to explain to them why they need the vaccine, they would disconnect less from their community than if the school apologized for not finding a francophone and sent them an anglophone because they all understand English anyway. So health is really important.

I will share a little 30-second anecdote. We went to an elementary school in Vancouver to encourage students to exercise more. We had a French-speaking player from BC Lions explain to all the students how important exercise is. They did a paced run twice around the school with Rolly Lumbala, and Radio-Canada came to film it. That is the type of activity that enriches the francophone community: building structures on the themes of health and mutual assistance. That is more of less what the movement's philosophy is.

● (1205)

Mr. René Arseneault: Congratulations.

Mr. Darrell Samson: So that means recruitment. By choosing a French or an immersion school, I'm guaranteed to have a francophone doctor.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: It's promotion.

Dr. Brian Conway: It is indeed promotion. The inventory is online. I don't know who among you has children, but when something is online, adolescents find it quickly.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Did you want to say something, Mr. Rothon?

Mr. Robert Rothon: I would like to add a quick comment to what Dr. Conway said concerning the issue Ms. Boucher raised earlier.

In a minority setting, it is often necessary to start by providing a service before a demand is created, which pretty much contradicts free market principles. The service often needs to be implemented before the demand is expressed. That is why it is important to be able to promote this service.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Very well.

Mr. Conway, I know that Canadian Heritage seems to be looking after the health sector well. Considering what anglophones provide in health care, what are we missing in French or what could we change or improve?

Dr. Brian Conway: Currently, integration in the health industry is based on the premise whereby public health is improved by providing people with services in French. So far, that has translated into pilot projects, a clinic or an inventory. However, what anglophones have and we do not is a set of structures within their health organizations. We will have to try to achieve something comparable on our side that integrates the language variable.

If, for example, an individual goes to the emergency room, which presumably has a francophone nurse, and the individual expresses the desire to get services in French, that nurse will be brought to them. The goal is to integrate the language variable within health organizations that provide services. That is how we need to proceed, as we will not have a francophone health services board like in New Brunswick. But we will manage anyway.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Samson.

I want to thank all the witnesses for their wonderful presentations. Your comments are certainly contributing to the committee's work, and I thank you very much on behalf of its members.

I would like to wrap up by thanking the staff, the clerk, the analyst, the interpreters and all those who are supporting us on this journey.

The meeting is adjourned.

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